

FEATURE

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THE MEDIA AND THE MESSAGE

by BOB STANLEY

The importance of communication and the news media in promoting national development has been largely ignored by governments in many developing countries. And this lack of communication has often led to costly mistakes, poor participation, and even outright opposition to development programs.

These comments come in a report on communication and the media just released by the Commonwealth Secretariat in London. Prepared by a group of nine veteran communicators from a cross-section of the Commonwealth countries, the report complains of a "reluctance on the part of policy-makers to concede that communication is a critical factor in development."

This, says the report, is a hangover from the colonial era, when the ability to work in English, the language of official communication, meant admission to an "élite group to which the power of decision-making was restricted."

The report argues that the communication process must be broadened, strengthened and diversified to reflect the needs and concerns of all groups within society. And, it adds, people must be able to participate in order to have a sense of commitment to national issues. "How many mistakes in social and economic development could have been avoided with better communications between the planners and the people?" ask the report's authors.

Developing country government must give "urgent and special" attention to the media and communications, the report urges. There is a need for comprehensive communications policies as a part of overall national planning. But the report also warns against excessive government interference with the media.

"For the media to have credibility...they must report events as they are, not necessarily as governments wish them to be reported," says the report, adding that this can lead to friction, and sometimes has resulted in government trying to impose total control on the media. "Credibility then becomes difficult to sustain when people know or suspect that events are not always as reported."

For their part, the media also have responsibilities and shortcomings, says the report. "The mass media in many developing countries, based primarily on colonial experience, are too heavily urban-oriented, and do not meet the needs of their rural populations."

The media can serve society in a number of ways, says the report — it can help people to improve themselves, to participate in the process of development, and to discover the important information they need. And the media can entertain: "There must be time for joy in society, no less than for effort, and the media can bring enjoyment into homes quickly and easily."

But above all, the report stresses, the media must always seek to report the truth, even in the face of constraints from governments that fear the power of the media. "No society can benefit when the media fail in this duty," says the report.

Looking at specific segments of the media, the report concludes that newspapers, despite barriers of cost, language and literacy, still have an important role to play, not only in providing accurate and up-to-date news, but also in helping to promote literacy.

Radio is described in the report as the medium of the people, largely as a result of the "transistor revolution" which has brought radio receivers within the reach of millions more people. The use of radio is still expanding, and presents special challenges. Commonwealth countries could benefit from sharing their experiences in the broadcasting field, says the report.

Television, though undoubtedly a powerful medium of communication, involves much higher costs than radio, both in terms of production and for the consumer. Sixteen of the 44 Commonwealth countries do not have television services.

Public information services are an important element of communication in many developing countries, says the report. But information officers are frequently given access to only part of the information they need. Too often governments consider them "merely as propaganda tools."

To balance the domination of the major international news agencies, the report sees a need to strengthen national and regional news agencies. This would help to produce news coverage that relates to the "actualities and aspirations" in developing countries. However, governments must avoid the temptation to try to control the news through such agencies.

Finally, the report examines the need for more and better training for media professionals — not only newspeople, but also non-formal communicators such as agricultural extension or family planning workers. "The proper development of all communication media requires a far more consistent and comprehensive pattern of training than has so far been possible," the report states.

The report and its list of recommendations will be on the agenda at the next Commonwealth heads of government meeting in August 1981. It was at their last meeting, in 1979, that the leaders endorsed the establishment of the media committee, with a mandate to "identify the most pressing communication and media problems", stressing the needs of the developing countries.

The resulting report must be providing many governments with plenty of food for thought. The question now is: will they get the message?

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